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RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL 3924
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEAWJC/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHOND/DIRONDCP WASHDC
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SUBJECT: BACKGROUND ON THE "CONVIVIR" SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS

REF: 02 BOGOTA 8317

Summary

1. (SBU) The "Convivir" self defense groups were authorized by President Gaviria 1994 and abolished by President Samper in 1998. Their original purpose was to enable citizens to defend themselves from terrorist attacks and to supply intelligence to the security forces. During their brief existence, the Convivir were controversial due to their involvement in numerous human rights abuses. Many human rights groups charge the Convivir fueled the growth of paramilitary groups. President Uribe, who was Governor of Antioquia from 1995-97, strongly supported the Convivir, but dismantled two such groups due to alleged human rights abuses. End summary.

1995, Convivir Created

2. (SBU) In February 1994, former President Gaviria issued a decree that created the "Superintendent of Vigilance and Private Security" under the Ministry of Defense. The Ministry of Defense was authorized to license private citizens to use firearms (pistols and revolvers) to protect themselves in high-risk areas. In April 1995, the Samper Administration used the Gaviria decree as the legal basis to issue regulations creating Public Self-Defense Groups called "Convivirs." The Convivirs were supposed to report counterinsurgency intelligence to local security forces, but some of the Convivirs were linked to gross human rights violations. Many human rights groups charge the Convivirs quickly degenerated into paramilitary groups.

1997, Convivir Abolished

3. (SBU) In October 1997, the Samper Administration issued a resolution abolishing the "Convivir," but did not take steps to dismantle them. Also in October, the Constitutional Court upheld the legality of the Convivir, declaring citizens had

the right to organize themselves in collective self-defense groups, but ordering the groups to give up all their heavy weapons, including machine guns and rifles. The original 1994 decree authorized the groups to use only small arms. Many groups ignored this restriction and acquired substantial arsenals.

¶4. (SBU) After the Constitutional Court's decision, the Samper Administration issued a decree and a resolution charging these groups with the responsibility to protect human rights. Still, reports of Convivirs colluding with paramilitaries continued, and in July 1998, the Samper Administration began dismantling them. Following his August 1998 inauguration, former President Andres Pastrana completed this process as a peace gesture aimed at the FARC.

Uribe's Role in the Convivir

¶5. (SBU) As Antioquia department Governor from 1995-97, Uribe actively supported the Convivir groups operating in Antioquia and put his Secretary of Government, Pedro Juan Moreno, in charge of overseeing them. Uribe asked that the Convivirs be authorized to use heavier arms, but the national government rejected his request. Uribe has publicly acknowledged that his request was a mistake in view of the human rights abuses later committed by some of the Convivirs. He claims, however, that only two Convivirs in Antioquia cooperated with the paramilitaries. He immediately dismantled them. GOC sources report that 70 Convivirs, out of 400 nationwide, operated in Antioquia.

2003, "Red de Cooperantes"

¶6. (SBU) Uribe admits that some of the Convivir grew out of control, but he sees citizen cooperation with Colombia's security forces as key to his democratic security strategy. In 2003, Uribe supported the creation of a network of informants, or "red de cooperantes," to provide information on suspicious activity or persons to the security forces. Participation in the program is voluntary. Members are equipped with radios or cellphones, and are strictly prohibited from carrying arms. The programs are administered and monitored by the Armed Forces and National Police.
Drucker